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Change in special-education student funding is subject of debate

bese meeting 3_6.JPG

Shown: The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education met in Baton Rouge on Thursday, March 6, 2014. The state's top education board approves the budget for Minimum Foundation Program annually. Some are hoping BESE will revise the final payment of that formula by June 2015 to correct funding inequity for schools serving special needs students.

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A bill designed to make the state equitably fund special-needs students has sparked some controversy among educators. **Senate Bill 267**, which the Louisiana Legislature quietly passed earlier this month, is drawing criticism from those who say it swiftly snatches charter school money.

At the same time, those who support and benefit from the bill are urging state leaders to speed its intended effect. The Louisiana **Board of Elementary and Secondary Education** should, by June's end, pay schools what they should get under SB 267 to fix past inequity, proponents say.

The measure changes the average dollar amount charters get for special-needs students to a weighted amount. That means that instead of receiving an average per child, schools will get money based on who they actually serve, said sponsor Sen. Dan Claitor, R-Baton Rouge.

Claitor said that's a good thing: "What was happening was, since the number would get averaged in in the different districts, schools that weren't taking children with disabilities were still getting the benefit of those dollars," he said.

"So we said, 'Let the money follow the child.'"

Though that statement has become the charter school movement's catchphrase, some charter school leaders take issue with Claitor's bill. That's not because they aren't out to help students, but because the bill goes into effect after Gov. **Bobby Jindal** signs it and after schools have already planned annual budgets.

"If it's going to be \$100,000 missing out of your budget, then I don't care how big your budget is. It's significant. It's really scary," said Millie Harris, executive director of Jefferson Chamber Foundation Academy, a Jefferson Parish charter.

Harris's charter, which serves students who would otherwise drop out, stands to benefit from the bill. Melanie Tennyson's doesn't, and the loss will be hard to make up: "We don't have accumulated wealth. We have a minimum reserve that we are required by law to keep, so we can't dip into our reserves," said the head of the International School of Louisiana, which has campuses in New Orleans and Jefferson.

Tennyson's Jefferson campus would lose an estimated \$145,000. The New Orleans school would lose \$185,000, she said. The changes do not affect Recovery School District charter schools, which **already receive funding** based on student need, not system averages.

With its membership's resources in mind, the nonprofit Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools sought to delay the bill's impact. That bid failed, to Tennyson's dismay.

But Claitor and Scott Richard of the Louisiana School Boards Association said if charter budgets must adjust, so what? No school system or charter school board "knows exactly what their [per-student] allocation will be. And school boards should operate with enough reserve funds to ensure that they can make those adjustments as needed," Richard said.

"It's not a pro-charter or an anti-charter issue." Rather, it's a fairness issue, he added.

Richard is among those asking the state School Board to speed up the bill's process. On Wednesday (June 17), he wanted members to ask the state Education Department to retract any money schools received but should not have this school year. The department could reconcile all payments by June 25, the date **this fiscal year's final** per-student allocation is due to schools and systems, he said.

State Education Superintendent **John White** dismissed the idea. One, the bill hasn't been signed into law. And two, there's a legal and constitutional question of whether Louisiana's per-student funding formula changes when the statute referencing it changes, White said.

At White's advice, the Board deferred a resolution that would do as Richard asked. White's office will produce a legal opinion on the matter by Friday.

*Read more about **Senate Bill 267**.*

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